

November 16, 2010

We start today with *American Narcissus*, a piece in The Weekly Standard by [Jonathan Last](#).

Why has Barack Obama failed so spectacularly? Is he too dogmatically liberal or too pragmatic? Is he a socialist, or an anticolonialist, or a philosopher-president? Or is it possible that Obama's failures stem from something simpler: vanity. Politicians as a class are particularly susceptible to mirror-gazing. But Obama's vanity is overwhelming. It defines him, his politics, and his presidency.

*It's revealed in lots of little stories. There was the time he bragged about how one of his campaign volunteers, who had tragically died of breast cancer, "insisted she's going to be buried in an Obama T-shirt." There was the Nobel acceptance speech where he conceded, "I do not bring with me today a **definitive** solution to the problems of war" (the emphasis is mine). There was the moment during the 2008 campaign when Obama appeared with a seal that was a mash-up of the Great Seal of the United States and his own campaign logo (with its motto *Vero Possumus*, "Yes we Can" in Latin). Just a few weeks ago, Obama was giving a speech when the actual presidential seal fell from the rostrum. "That's all right," he quipped. "All of you know who I am." Oh yes, Mr. President, we certainly do. ...*

... Yet you don't have to delve deep into armchair psychology to see how Obama's vanity has shaped his presidency. In January 2009 he met with congressional leaders to discuss the stimulus package. The meeting was supposed to foster bipartisanship. Senator Jon Kyl questioned the plan's mixture of spending and tax cuts. Obama's response to him was, "I won." A year later Obama held another meeting to foster bipartisanship for his health care reform plan. There was some technical back-and-forth about Republicans not having the chance to properly respond within the constraints of the format because President Obama had done some pontificating, as is his wont. Obama explained, "There was an imbalance on the opening statements because"—here he paused, self-satisfied—"I'm the president. And so I made, uh, I don't count my time in terms of dividing it evenly."

There are lots of times when you get the sense that Obama views the powers of the presidency as little more than a shadow of his own person. When he journeyed to Copenhagen in October 2009 to pitch Chicago's bid for the Olympics, his speech to the IOC was about—you guessed it: "Nearly one year ago, on a clear November night," he told the committee, "people from every corner of the world gathered in the city of Chicago or in front of their televisions to watch the results of .□□.□□." and away he went. A short while later he was back in Copenhagen for the climate change summit. When things looked darkest, he personally commandeered the meeting to broker a "deal." Which turned out to be worthless. In January 2010, Obama met with nervous Democratic congressmen to assure them that he wasn't driving the party off a cliff. Confronted with worries that 2010 could be a worse off-year election than 1994, Obama explained to the professional politicians, "Well, the big difference here and in '94 was you've got me."

In the midst of the BP oil spill last summer, Obama explained, "My job right now is just to make sure that everybody in the Gulf understands this is what I wake up to in the morning and this is what I go to bed at night thinking about: the spill." Read that again: The president thinks that the job of the president is to make certain the citizens correctly understand what's on the president's mind.

Obama's vanity is even more jarring when paraded in the foreign arena. ...

[Jennifer Rubin](#) continues the thought.

... If Obama is ungracious (toward his predecessor), oblivious (to the desires of the voters), and frustrated (by the Palestinians' and Israelis' refusal to make a deal under his auspices), it is because he is unable to grasp that it's not all about him. But the good news is that, as he reportedly did in the Senate, he may conclude that being president is really "so boring." (He certainly doesn't seem to be having fun, does he?) In that case, he might not really care all that much about trying to ingratiate himself with the voters. It very well might not be "worth it" in his mind to temper his views in order to get a second term. Freed from the burdens of the presidency he then might do what he loves best — write books and give speeches about himself. Or maybe he can give speeches about writing books about himself.

[Bill Kristol](#) with a recent vignette that will add to the legend.

... After a contentious economic summit where the president was forced to defend the Fed's ill-advised monetary policies, a summit that followed on the heels of the biggest midterm electoral defeat ever suffered by an elected first-term president, a defeat partly due to his ill-advised fiscal policies, did Obama really expect a reporter to stand up at the end of last week and ask, "Mr. President, what compliments did you receive from foreign leaders?"

That is, apparently, exactly what the president expected.

Just how is our shining light doing on the world stage? Two items on the failure in Seoul. First [Charles Krauthammer](#).

Whenever a president walks into a room with another head of state and he walks out empty-handed — he's got a failure on his hands.

And this was self-inflicted. With Obama it's now becoming a ritual. It's a combination of incompetence, inexperience, and arrogance. He was handed a treaty by the [Bush administration](#). It was done. But he wanted to improve on it. And instead, so far, he's got nothing. ...

And from [Foreign Policy](#), a professional's view.

President Obama's [failure](#) to conclude the Korea-United States Free Trade Agreement (KORUS) is a disaster. It reveals a stunning level of ineptitude and seriously undermines America's leadership in the global economy. The implications extend far beyond selling Buicks in Busan.

Unlike some of the trade agreements the United States has pursued in the last decade, this one is with an economically [significant](#) partner. KORUS could bring billions of dollars of new trade opportunities and the Obama administration had cited it as one part of its [National Export Initiative](#), a plan to double U.S. exports in five years.

But there are really two distinct issues in contemplating the significance of the failed talks: the economic merits and questions of diplomatic competence. The latter is really the story of the day. ...

Summing all this up we have [Bret Stephens](#) on the dangers of America's will to weakness.

Lately in the news:

Beijing provokes clashes with the navies of both Indonesia and Japan as part of a bid to claim the South China Sea. Tokyo is in a serious diplomatic row with Russia over the South Kuril islands, a leftover dispute from 1945. There are credible fears that Tehran and Damascus will use the

anticipated indictment of Hezbollah figures by a U.N. tribunal to overthrow the elected Lebanese government. Managua is attempting to annex a sliver of Costa Rica, a nation much too virtuous to have an army of its own. And speaking of Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega is setting himself up as another Hugo Chávez by running, unconstitutionally, for another term. Both men are friends and allies of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

About all of this, the Obama administration has basically done nothing. As Sarah Palin might say: How's that multi-poley stuff workin' out for ya?

Throughout the Bush years, "multipolarity" was held up as the intelligent and necessary alternative to the supposedly go-it-alone approach to the world of the incumbent administration. French President Jacques Chirac was for it: "I have no doubt," he said in 2003, "that the multipolar vision of the world that I have defended for some time is certainly supported by a large majority of countries throughout the world." So were such doyens of the U.S. foreign policy establishment as Fareed Zakaria and Francis Fukuyama. ...

So what are the current conditions of sea life in the Gulf of Mexico? Would you be surprised to learn all the critters are thriving? [National Review](#) has the story.

The catastrophists were wrong (again) about the Deep Water Horizon oil spill. There have been no major fish die-offs. On the contrary, a comprehensive new study says that in some of the most heavily fished areas of the Gulf of Mexico, various forms of sea life, from shrimp to sharks, have seen their populations triple since before the spill. Some species, including shrimp and croaker, did even better.

And meanwhile, the media has greatly exaggerated damage found in studies about coral, which is in some ways more vulnerable to oil and dispersant. Most of it is doing fine.

The growth of the fish population is not occurring because oil is good for fish. Rather, it is occurring because fishing is bad for fish. When fishing was banned for months during the spill, the Gulf of Mexico experienced an unprecedented marine renaissance that overwhelmed any negative environmental consequences the oil may have had, researchers say.

Even the researchers themselves, however, were surprised by the results. "We expected there to be virtually no fish out there based on all the reports we were getting about the toxicity of the dispersant and the toxicity of the hydrocarbons, and reports that hypoxia [low oxygen] had been created as a result of the oil and dispersant," says John Valentine, who directed the study. "In every way you can imagine, it should have been a hostile environment for fish and crabs; our collection showed that was not the case."

Weekly Standard

American Narcissus

The vanity of Barack Obama

by Jonathan V. Last

Why has Barack Obama failed so spectacularly? Is he too dogmatically liberal or too pragmatic? Is he a socialist, or an anticolonialist, or a philosopher-president? Or is it possible that Obama's failures stem from something simpler: vanity. Politicians as a class are particularly susceptible to mirror-gazing. But Obama's vanity is overwhelming. It defines him, his politics, and his presidency.

It's revealed in lots of little stories. There was the time he bragged about how one of his campaign volunteers, who had tragically died of breast cancer, "insisted she's going to be buried in an Obama T-shirt." There was the Nobel acceptance speech where he conceded, "I do not bring with me today a *definitive* solution to the problems of war" (the emphasis is mine). There was the moment during the 2008 campaign when Obama appeared with a seal that was a mash-up of the Great Seal of the United States and his own campaign logo (with its motto *Vero Possumus*, "Yes we Can" in Latin). Just a few weeks ago, Obama was giving a speech when the actual presidential seal fell from the rostrum. "That's all right," he quipped. "All of you know who I am." *Oh yes, Mr. President, we certainly do.*

My favorite is this line from page 160 of *The Audacity of Hope*:

I find comfort in the fact that the longer I'm in politics the less nourishing popularity becomes, that a striving for power and rank and fame seems to betray a poverty of ambition, and that I am answerable mainly to the steady gaze of my own conscience.

So popularity and fame once nourished him, but now his ambition is richer and he's answerable not, like some presidents, to the Almighty, but to the gaze of his personal conscience. Which is steady. The fact that this sentence appears in the second memoir of a man not yet 50 years old—and who had been in national politics for all of two years—is merely icing.

People have been noticing Obama's vanity for a long time. In 2008, one of his Harvard Law classmates, the entertainment lawyer Jackie Fuchs, explained what Obama was like during his school days: "One of our classmates once famously noted that you could judge just how pretentious someone's remarks in class were by how high they ranked on the 'Obamanometer,' a term that lasted far longer than our time at law school. Obama didn't just share in class—he pontificated. He knew better than everyone else in the room, including the teachers. "



The story of Obama's writing career is an object lesson in how our president's view of himself shapes his interactions with the world around him. In 1990, Obama was wrapping up his second year at Harvard Law when the *New York Times* ran a profile of him on the occasion of his becoming the first black editor of the *Harvard Law Review*. A book agent in New York named Jane Dystel read the story and called up the young man, asking if he'd be interested in writing a book. Like any 29-year-old, he wasn't about to turn down money. He promptly accepted a deal with Simon & Schuster's Poseidon imprint—reportedly in the low six-figures—to write a book about race relations.

Obama missed his deadline. No matter. His agent quickly secured him another contract, this time with Times Books. And a \$40,000 advance. Not bad for an unknown author who had already blown one deal, writing about a noncommercial subject.

By this point Obama had left law school, and academia was courting him. The University of Chicago Law School approached him; although they didn't have any specific needs, they wanted to be in the Barack Obama business. As Douglas Baird, the head of Chicago's appointments committee, would later explain, "You look at his background—*Harvard Law Review* president, magna cum laude, and he's African American. This is a no-brainer hiring decision at the entry level of any law school in the country." Chicago invited Obama to come in and teach just about anything he wanted. But Obama wasn't interested in a professor's life. Instead, he told them that he was writing a book—about voting rights. The university made him a fellow, giving him an office and a paycheck to keep him going while he worked on this important project.

In case you're keeping score at home, there was some confusion as to what book young Obama was writing. His publisher thought he was writing about race relations. His employer thought he was writing about voting rights law. But Obama seems to have never seriously considered either subject. Instead, he decided that his subject would be himself. The 32-year-old was writing a memoir.

Obama came clean to the university first. He waited until his fellowship was halfway over—perhaps he was concerned that his employers might not like the bait-and-switch. He needn't have worried. Baird still hoped that Obama would eventually join the university's faculty (he had already begun teaching a small classload as a "senior lecturer"). "It was a good deal for us," Baird explained, "because he was a good teaching prospect and we wanted him around."

And it all worked out in the end. The book Obama eventually finished was *Dreams from My Father*. It didn't do well initially, but nine years later, after his speech at the 2004 Democratic convention made him a star, it sold like gangbusters. Obama got rich. And famous. The book became the springboard for his career in national politics.

Only it didn't quite work out for everybody. Obama left the University of Chicago, never succumbing to their offers of a permanent position in their hallowed halls. Simon & Schuster, which had taken a chance on an unproven young writer, got burned for a few thousand bucks. And Jane Dystel, who'd plucked him out of the pages of the *New York Times* and got him the deal to write the book that sped his political rise? As soon as Obama was ready to negotiate the contract for his second book—the big-money payday—he dumped her and replaced her with super-agent Robert Barnett.

We risk reading too much into these vignettes—after all, our president is a mansion with many rooms and it would be foolish to reduce him to pure ego. Yet the vignettes are so numerous. For instance, a few years ago Obama's high school basketball coach told ABC News how, as a teenager, Obama always badgered him for more playing time, even though he wasn't the best player on the team—or even as good as he thought he was. Everyone who has ever played team sports has encountered the kid with an inflated sense of self. That's common. What's rare is the kid who feels entitled enough to nag the coach about his minutes. Obama was that kid. His enthusiasm about his abilities and his playing time extended into his political life. In 2004, Obama explained to author David Mendell how he saw his future as a national political figure: "I'm LeBron, baby. I can play on this level. I got some game." After just a couple of months in the Senate, Obama jumped the Democratic line and started asking voters to make him president.

Yet you don't have to delve deep into armchair psychology to see how Obama's vanity has shaped his presidency. In January 2009 he met with congressional leaders to discuss the stimulus package. The meeting was supposed to foster bipartisanship. Senator Jon Kyl questioned the plan's mixture of spending and tax cuts. Obama's response to him was, "I won." A year later Obama held another meeting to foster bipartisanship for his health care reform plan. There was some technical back-and-forth about Republicans not having the chance to properly respond within the constraints of the format because President Obama had done some pontificating, as is his wont. Obama explained, "There was an imbalance on the opening statements because"—here he paused, self-satisfied—"I'm the president. And so I made, uh, I don't count my time in terms of dividing it evenly."

There are lots of times when you get the sense that Obama views the powers of the presidency as little more than a shadow of his own person. When he journeyed to Copenhagen in October 2009 to pitch Chicago's bid for the Olympics, his speech to the IOC was about—you guessed it: "Nearly one year ago, on a clear November night," he told the committee, "people from every corner of the world gathered in the city of Chicago or in front of their televisions to watch the results of .□□.□□." and away he went. A short while later he was back in Copenhagen for the climate change summit. When things looked darkest, he personally commandeered the meeting to broker a "deal." Which turned out to be worthless. In January 2010, Obama met with nervous Democratic congressmen to assure them that he wasn't driving the party off a cliff. Confronted with worries that 2010 could be a worse off-year election than 1994, Obama explained to the professional politicians, "Well, the big difference here and in '94 was you've got me."

In the midst of the BP oil spill last summer, Obama explained, “My job right now is just to make sure that everybody in the Gulf understands this is what I wake up to in the morning and this is what I go to bed at night thinking about: the spill.” Read that again: The president thinks that the job of the president is to make certain the citizens correctly understand what’s on the president’s mind.

Obama’s vanity is even more jarring when paraded in the foreign arena. In April, Poland suffered a national tragedy when its president, first lady, and a good portion of the government were killed in a plane crash. Obama decided not to go to the funeral. He played golf instead. Though maybe it’s best that he didn’t make the trip. When he journeyed to Great Britain to meet with the queen he gave her an amazing gift: an iPod loaded with recordings of his speeches and pictures from his inauguration.

On November 9, 2009, Europe celebrated the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. It was kind of a big deal. They may not mention the Cold War in schools much these days, but it pitted the Western liberal order against a totalitarian ideology in a global struggle. In this the United States was the guarantor of liberty and peace for the West; had we faltered, no corner of the world would have been safe from Soviet domination.

President Obama has a somewhat different reading. He explains: “The Cold War reached a conclusion because of the actions of many nations over many years, and because the people of Russia and Eastern Europe stood up and decided that its end would be peaceful.” Pretty magnanimous of the Soviets to let the long twilight struggle end peacefully like that, especially after all we did to provoke them.

So Obama doesn’t know much about the Cold War. Which is probably why he didn’t think the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall was all that important. When the leaders of Europe got together to commemorate it, he decided not to go to that, either. But he did find time to record a video message, which he graciously allowed the Europeans to air during the ceremony.

In his video, Obama ruminated for a few minutes on the grand events of the 20th century, the Cold War itself, and the great lesson we all should take from this historic passing: “Few would have foreseen . . . that a united Germany would be led by a woman from Brandenburg or that their American ally would be led by a man of African descent. But human destiny is what human beings make of it.” The fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the Cold War, and the freedom of all humanity—it’s great stuff. Right up there with the election of Barack Obama.

All presidents are hostage to self-confidence. But not since Babe Ruth grabbed a bat and wagged his fat finger at Wrigley’s center-field wall has an American politician called his shot like Barack Obama. He announced his candidacy in Springfield, Illinois, on the steps where Abraham Lincoln gave his “house divided” speech. He mentioned Lincoln continually during the 2008 campaign. After he vanquished John McCain he passed out copies of *Team of Rivals*, a book about Lincoln’s cabinet, to his senior staff. At his inauguration, he chose to be sworn into office using Lincoln’s Bible. At the inaugural luncheon following the ceremony, he requested that the food—each dish of which was selected as a “tribute” to Lincoln—be served on replicas of Lincoln’s china. At some point in January 2009 you wanted to grab Obama by the lapels and tell him—*We get it! You’re the Rail Splitter! If we promise to play along, will you keep the log cabin out of the Rose Garden?*

It’s troubling that a fellow whose electoral rationale was that he edited the *Harvard Law Review* and wrote a couple of memoirs was comparing himself to the man who saved the Union. But it tells you all you need to know about what Obama thinks of his political gifts and why he’s unperturbed about having led his party into political disaster in the midterms. He assumes that he’ll be able to reverse the political tide once he becomes the issue, in the presidential race in 2012. As he said to Harry Reid after the majority leader congratulated him on one particularly fine oration, “I have a gift, Harry.”

But Obama's faith in his abilities extends beyond mere vote-getting. Buried in a 2008 *New Yorker* piece by Ryan Lizza about the Obama campaign was this gob-smacking passage:

Obama said that he liked being surrounded by people who expressed strong opinions, but he also said, "I think that I'm a better speechwriter than my speechwriters. I know more about policies on any particular issue than my policy directors. And I'll tell you right now that I'm gonna think I'm a better political director than my political director." After Obama's first debate with McCain, on September 26th, [campaign political director Patrick Gaspard sent him an e-mail. "You are more clutch than Michael Jordan," he wrote. Obama replied, "Just give me the ball."

In fairness to Obama, maybe he is a better speechwriter than his speechwriters. After all, his speechwriter was a 27-year-old, and the most affecting part of Obama's big 2008 stump speech was recycled from Massachusetts governor Deval Patrick, with whom he shared a campaign strategist. But it's instructive that Obama thinks he knows "more about policies on any particular issue" than his policy directors. The rate of growth of the mohair subsidy? The replacement schedule for servers at the NORAD command center? The relationship between annual rainfall in northeast Nevada and water prices in Las Vegas?

What Scott Fitzgerald once said about Hollywood is true of the American government: It can be understood only dimly and in flashes; there are no more than a handful of men who have ever been able to keep the entire equation in their heads. Barack Obama had worked in the federal government for all of four years. He was not one of those men. More important, however, is that as president *he shouldn't be* the chief wonk, speechwriter, and political director.

David Remnick delivers a number of insights about Obama in his book *The Bridge*. For instance, Valerie Jarrett—think of her as the president's Karen Hughes—tells Remnick that Obama is often bored with the world around him. "I think that he has never really been challenged intellectually," Jarrett says. "So what I sensed in him was not just a restless spirit but somebody with such extraordinary talents that they had to be really taxed in order for him to be happy." Jarrett concludes, "He's been bored to death his whole life."

With one or two possible exceptions, that is. Remnick reports that "Jarrett was quite sure that one of the few things that truly engaged him fully before going to the White House was writing *Dreams from My Father*." So the only job Barack Obama ever had that didn't bore him was writing about Barack Obama. But wait, there's more.

David Axelrod—he's Obama's Karl Rove—told Remnick that "Barack hated being a senator." Remnick went on:

Washington was a grander stage than Springfield, but the frustrations of being a rookie in a minority party were familiar. Obama could barely conceal his frustration with the torpid pace of the Senate. His aides could sense his frustration and so could his colleagues. "He was so bored being a senator," one Senate aide said.

Obama's friend and law firm colleague Judd Miner agreed. "The reality," Miner told Remnick, "was that during his first two years in the U.S. Senate, I think, he was struggling; it wasn't nearly as stimulating as he expected." But even during his long, desolate exile as a senator, Obama was able to find a task that satisfied him. Here's Remnick again: "The one project that did engage Obama fully was work on *The Audacity of Hope*. He procrastinated for a long time and then, facing his deadline, wrote nearly a chapter a week." Your tax dollars at work.

Looking at this American Narcissus, it's easy to be hammered into a stupor by the accumulated acts of vanity. *Oh look, we think to ourselves, there's our new president accepting his Nobel Peace Prize. There's the president likening his election to the West's victory in the Cold War. There's the commander in chief bragging about his March Madness picks.*

Yet it's important to remember that our presidents aren't always this way. When he accepted command of the Revolutionary forces, George Washington said,

I feel great distress, from a consciousness that my abilities and military experience may not be equal to the extensive and important Trust. . . . I beg it may be remembered, by every Gentleman in the room, that I, this day, declare with the utmost sincerity, I do not think myself equal to the Command I am honored with.

Accepting the presidency, Washington was even more reticent. Being chosen to be president, he said, "could not but overwhelm with despondence one who, inheriting inferior endowments from nature and unpracticed in the duties of civil administration, ought to be peculiarly conscious of his own deficiencies."

In his biography of John Quincy Adams, Robert Remini noted that Adams was not an especially popular fellow. Yet on one of the rare occasions when he was met with adoring fans, "he told crowds that gathered to see and hear him to go home and attend to their private duties."

And Obama? In light of the present state of his presidency, let's look back at his most famous oration:

The journey will be difficult. The road will be long. I face this challenge with profound humility, and knowledge of my own limitations. But I also face it with limitless faith in the capacity of the American people. Because if we are willing to work for it, and fight for it, and believe in it, then I am absolutely certain that generations from now, we will be able to look back and tell our children that this was the moment when we began to provide care for the sick and good jobs to the jobless; this was the moment when the rise of the oceans began to slow and our planet began to heal; this was the moment when we ended a war and secured our nation and restored our image as the last, best hope on earth. This was the moment—this was the time—when we came together to remake this great nation so that it may always reflect our very best selves and our highest ideals.

The speech was given on June 3, 2008, and the epoch-making historical event to which "this moment" refers throughout is Barack Obama's victory over Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primaries.

Contentions

[He's Perfect — Why Change?](#)

by Jennifer Rubin

Jonathan Last's [must-read piece on Obama](#) eschews exotic or fanciful explanations for the president's mindset and precipitous fall to earth. It's not anti-colonialism that motivates him, or imitation of his absent father that propelled him to the White House. He's not a secret Muslim. He is, rather, an egomaniac, Last posits. He's got a ton of evidence for this, mostly in the form of cringe-inducing statements from Obama's own lips.

This raises a few critical issues. First, the vanity explanation accounts for his super-sensitivity to criticism. Nothing provokes Obama like doubts about his sincerity (the trigger for his belated outburst against Rev. Jeremiah Wright) or his wisdom. He has so many “enemies,” as he referred to Republicans — Fox News, the Chamber of Commerce, Rush Limbaugh, the news cycle, etc. — because he was so unaccustomed to criticism and so removed from rational evaluation of his abilities and positions. No wonder he is so angry at, and disdainful of, the American people. They are, unlike the sycophants who helped manufacture The Ego, no longer enamored of him. Nor is this president given to self-deprecating humor, for not even self-criticism in jest is tolerable.

Second, the colossal failure of his international endeavors, specifically his Muslim Outreach, is traceable to the faulty notion that one can construct a nation’s foreign policy based on the persona of its president. It sounds daft — why would the Israelis and Palestinian simply reach a deal because Obama has arrived on the scene? Why would the mullahs be enticed to curb their nuclear and hegemonic ambitions because he allegedly “understands” the Muslim World? The Ego has made hash out of foreign policy because he believes, as the saying goes, that the world revolves around him. He can’t imagine that rivals, foes, and allies are immune to his charms.

Most important, the vanity surplus would be less of a hindrance if he were an innovative policy wonk or a savvy analyst of the American electorate. This was the Bill Clinton model — an outsized ego and an utter lack of self-discipline, but an inventive mind able to zig-zag his way through choppy political waters. His intuitive understanding of his fellow citizens allowed him to maintain a bond with the American people. If Obama were as intellectually nimble as Clinton or as simpatico with the American people as Ronald Reagan or as steeped in common sense as Harry Truman, he wouldn’t be in such dire straits. It’s not merely the vanity that’s the problem. His undoing has been vanity that is divorced from his abilities and unaccompanied by executive skills or a well-developed knowledge of economics and international relations.

If Obama is ungracious (toward his predecessor), oblivious (to the desires of the voters), and frustrated (by the Palestinians’ and Israelis’ refusal to make a deal under his auspices), it is because he is unable to grasp that it’s not all about him. But the good news is that, as he reportedly did in the Senate, he may conclude that being president is really “so boring.” (He certainly doesn’t seem to be having fun, does he?) In that case, he might not really care all that much about trying to ingratiate himself with the voters. It very well might not be “worth it” in his mind to temper his views in order to get a second term. Freed from the burdens of the presidency he then might do what he loves best — write books and give speeches about himself. Or maybe he can give speeches about writing books about himself.

Weekly Standard

Obama: ‘What About Compliments?’

by Willam Kristol

At his November 12 press conference in Seoul, President Obama was asked the following question by CBS’s Chip Reid: “What was the number-one complaint, concern, or piece of advice that you got from foreign leaders about the U.S. economy and your stewardship of the economy?”

Whereupon the president began his response with a complaint: “What about compliments?” he asked. “You didn’t put that in the list.”

Well, sooooo, Mr. President.

Poor President Obama. He's (allegedly) getting all these compliments from his fellow world leaders—and the press just isn't interested in having him tell us about them. True, President Obama became accustomed, as a candidate, to having a compliant press corps. But even so. After a contentious economic summit where the president was forced to defend the Fed's ill-advised monetary policies, a summit that followed on the heels of the biggest midterm electoral defeat ever suffered by an elected first-term president, a defeat partly due to his ill-advised fiscal policies, did Obama really expect a reporter to stand up at the end of last week and ask, "Mr. President, what compliments did you receive from foreign leaders?"

That is, apparently, exactly what the president expected.

The Corner **[Krauthammer's Take](#)**

From Thursday night's *Fox News All-Stars*.

On President Obama's failure to seal a free-trade [deal](#) with South Korea:

Whenever a president walks into a room with another head of state and he walks out empty-handed — he's got a failure on his hands.

And this was self-inflicted. With Obama it's now becoming a ritual. It's a combination of incompetence, inexperience, and arrogance. He was handed a treaty by the [Bush administration](#). It was done. But he wanted to improve on it. And instead, so far, he's got nothing. ...

And this is a pattern with Obama. He thinks he can reinvent the world. With Iran, he decides he has a silver tongue, he'll sweet-talk 'em into a deal. He gets humiliated over and over again. With the Russians he does a reset, he gives up missile defense, he gets nothing.

In the Middle East, he proposes a ban on Jewish [construction](#) in Jerusalem, which is never going to happen. And what does it do? After 17 years [of negotiations without any preconditions] it destroys any chance of negotiations.

Again, a combination of [incompetence] — he comes in, I'll reinvent the world, I know everything — and arrogance. And the result? He gets zero results.

Foreign Policy - Shadow Government Blog **[The KORUS catastrophe](#)** by Phil Levy

President Obama's [failure](#) to conclude the Korea-United States Free Trade Agreement (KORUS) is a disaster. It reveals a stunning level of ineptitude and seriously undermines America's leadership in the global economy. The implications extend far beyond selling Buicks in Busan.

Unlike some of the trade agreements the United States has pursued in the last decade, this one is with an economically [significant](#) partner. KORUS could bring billions of dollars of new trade opportunities and the Obama administration had cited it as one part of its [National Export Initiative](#), a plan to double U.S. exports in five years.

But there are really two distinct issues in contemplating the significance of the failed talks: the economic merits and questions of diplomatic competence. The latter is really the story of the day.

The economic merits and demerits have been in full public view since the agreement was originally concluded in the spring of 2007. The agreement offered substantial market opening, but left some questions regarding access to the South Korean market, especially for U.S. autos and beef. Those products face barriers other than simple border tariffs. Such non-tariff barriers are harder to negotiate away, though the KORUS agreement certainly tried. There was substantial political opposition to the agreement within both countries, though the Koreans managed to overcome theirs. Influential voices such as Ford Motor Co. and organized labor in the United States criticized the agreement as inadequate.

The well-established opposition just brings us to the stunning, perhaps unprecedented diplomatic incompetence just displayed by the White House. The concerns and obstacles that impede a new KORUS agreement were [fully apparent](#) in June when Obama [announced](#) he would have an agreement in time for the Seoul G-20 meetings (now underway). The announcement was remarkable at the time because so much of the U.S. president's statements on trade have been vague, aspirational, and timeless. This was a promise to have a specific agreement concluded by a specific date.

Reflecting on the health care battle, Obama recently [told](#) *60 Minutes*, "When you're campaigning, I think you're liberated to say things without thinking about, 'OK, how am I going to actually practically implement this.'" That may be true, but the rules change once a president takes office. Most White Houses are exceedingly careful about making such public commitments. If the president's credibility is to be put on the line, there is an absolute imperative to deliver. This is at least as true in international diplomacy as in domestic affairs. The debacle in Seoul is a slap in the face of a critical U.S. ally in a critical region, and it will cast doubt on U.S. trade promises in other negotiations elsewhere. But if an American president loses his credibility, the damage spreads beyond the narrow confines of economic deals and Northeast Asia.

Of course, Obama did not admit defeat. He [spoke](#) of the setback as a mere postponement. "We don't want months to pass before we get this done. We want this to be done in a matter of weeks." If the agreement really is just a few weeks' work away, the administration ought to be deeply embarrassed. After the president made his June commitment, no formal talks were held with the Koreans until the end of September. Even then, the Koreans complained that the U.S. negotiators were not being sufficiently specific in their proposals. If the problems really are just technical ones, the Obama team has played the role of the student who procrastinates on a term paper, counting on the ability to have a really productive all-nighter. Such a work program evokes little sympathy when it doesn't succeed.

More likely, though, the obstacles are not technical but political. The lineup of advocates and opponents for KORUS poses difficult choices for the White House. Traditionally, governments around the world make such tough trade choices when they are right up against a deadline. But if the deal could not be concluded under the pressure of a high-profile bilateral meeting between presidents in Seoul, is it really plausible that it will be wrapped up because negotiators want to be home for Thanksgiving?

The breakdown could not have come at a worse time. The United States has been working to assert its relevance in Asia. Concerns about protectionist pressures amidst economic troubles raise the stakes in bolstering the global trading system. Beyond economic questions, countries around the world are wondering about the strength of a president who just suffered a major political setback.

Though he may not have foreseen all of the difficulties he would be facing at this juncture, last summer Obama named the time and place of his global credibility test. And he just failed it.

WSJ

Obama's Air Guitar

The danger of America's will to weakness.

by Bret Stephens

Lately in the news:

Beijing provokes clashes with the navies of both Indonesia and Japan as part of a bid to claim the South China Sea. Tokyo is in a serious diplomatic row with Russia over the South Kuril islands, a leftover dispute from 1945. There are credible fears that Tehran and Damascus will use the anticipated indictment of Hezbollah figures by a U.N. tribunal to overthrow the elected Lebanese government. Managua is attempting to annex a sliver of Costa Rica, a nation much too virtuous to have an army of its own. And speaking of Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega is setting himself up as another Hugo Chávez by running, unconstitutionally, for another term. Both men are friends and allies of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

About all of this, the Obama administration has basically done nothing. As Sarah Palin might say: How's that multi-poley stuff workin' out for ya?

Throughout the Bush years, "multipolarity" was held up as the intelligent and necessary alternative to the supposedly go-it-alone approach to the world of the incumbent administration. French President Jacques Chirac was for it: "I have no doubt," he said in 2003, "that the multipolar vision of the world that I have defended for some time is certainly supported by a large majority of countries throughout the world." So were such doyens of the U.S. foreign policy establishment as Fareed Zakaria and Francis Fukuyama.

In this view, multipolarity wasn't merely a description of the world as it is, or of the world soon to come. It was also a prescription, a belief that a globe containing multiple centers of influence and power was preferable to one in which American dominance led, inevitably, to American excess. The war in Iraq was supposed to be Exhibit A.

Barack Obama was also a subscriber to this view. In the fall of 2008, a high-ranking foreign diplomat paid a visit to the offices of The Wall Street Journal and told a story of a meeting he and his colleagues had had with the Illinois senator. Mr. Obama, the diplomat recounted, had gone out of his way to arrange the chairs in a circle, not just as a courtesy but also as an effort to suggest that there was no pecking order to the meeting, that they all sat as equals. Wasn't that nice? Didn't it set a better tone?

Maybe it did. And maybe, given the thrust of some of President Obama's ideas on trade, currency and monetary policy, it's just as well. But whether an American president ought to get his way on a matter of policy is one thing. That a president *can't* get his way is another. That's a recipe for the global disorder we are beginning to see encroaching from Central America to the Middle and Far East.

Last week, Mr. Obama was so resoundingly rebuffed by other leaders at the G-20 summit in Seoul that even the New York Times noticed: Mr. Obama, the paper wrote, faced "stiff challenges . . . from

the leaders of China, Britain, Germany and Brazil." His administration has now been chastised or belittled by everyone from the Supreme Leader of Iran to the finance minister of Germany to the president of France to the dictator of Syria. What does it mean for global order when the world figures out that the U.S. president is someone who's willing to take no for an answer?

The answer is that the United States becomes Europe. Except on a handful of topics, like trade and foreign aid, the foreign policy of the European Union, and that of most of its constituent states, amounts to a kind of diplomatic air guitar: furious motion, considerable imagination, but neither sound nor effect. When a European leader issues a stern demarche toward, say, Burma or Russia, nobody notices. And nobody cares.

If the U.S. were to become another Europe—not out of diminished power, but out of a diminished will to assert its power—there would surely never be another Iraq war. That prospect would probably delight some readers of this column. It would also probably mean more fondness for the U.S. in some quarters where it is now often suspected. Vancouver, say, or the Parisian left bank. And that would gladden hearts from the Upper West Side to the Lower East Side.

But it would mean other things, too. The small and distant abuses of power, would grow bolder and more frequent. America's exhortations for restraint or decency would seem cheaper. Multipolarity is a theory that, inevitably, leads to old-fashioned spheres of influence. It has little regard for small states: Taiwan, Mongolia, Israel, Georgia, Latvia, Costa Rica. The romance of the balance of power might have made sense when one empire was, more or less, as despotic as the next. It is less morally compelling when the choice is between democracy and Putinism, as it is today for Ukraine.

We are now at risk of entering a period—perhaps a decade, perhaps a half-century—of global disorder, brought about by a combination of weaker U.S. might and even weaker U.S. will. The last time we saw something like it was exactly a century ago. Winston Churchill wrote a book about it: "The World Crisis, 1911-1918." Available in paperback. Worth reading today.

National Review

[Sea Life Flourishes in the Gulf](#)

The Great Oil Spill Panic of 2010 will go down in history as mass hysteria on par with the Dutch tulip bubble.

by Lou Dolinar

The catastrophists were wrong (again) about the Deep Water Horizon oil spill. There have been no major fish die-offs. On the contrary, a comprehensive new study says that in some of the most heavily fished areas of the Gulf of Mexico, various forms of sea life, from shrimp to sharks, have seen their populations triple since before the spill. Some species, including shrimp and croaker, did even better.

And meanwhile, the media has greatly exaggerated damage found in studies about coral, which is in some ways more vulnerable to oil and dispersant. Most of it is doing fine.

The growth of the fish population is not occurring because oil is good for fish. Rather, it is occurring because fishing is bad for fish. When fishing was banned for months during the spill, the Gulf of Mexico experienced an unprecedented marine renaissance that overwhelmed any negative environmental consequences the oil may have had, researchers say.

Even the researchers themselves, however, were surprised by the results. "We expected there to be virtually no fish out there based on all the reports we were getting about the toxicity of the dispersant and the toxicity of the hydrocarbons, and reports that hypoxia [low oxygen] had been created as a

result of the oil and dispersant,” says John Valentine, who directed the study. “In every way you can imagine, it should have been a hostile environment for fish and crabs; our collection showed that was not the case.”

Also surprising was how quickly the populations grew. “In the cosmic scheme of things, a matter of four or five months led to this huge difference in everything, sharks, fish of all forms, even the juvenile fish found in sea-grass beds. That’s a pretty interesting and unanticipated outcome, I would say,” says Valentine. The surge is so robust, he says, that it may be impossible to determine whether the oil spill has had any effect on sea life at all.

Valentine says the study doesn’t let BP off the hook — Gulf fishermen have suffered real and costly damage from the closure and from what he calls the “sociological phenomenon” that’s scared consumers away from Gulf seafood. But nor does it excuse President Obama’s disastrous panic and overreaction in temporarily banning oil drilling in the Gulf, especially since official reports are now saying that the oil will be disposed of naturally, as experts predicted. Oil is being measured in parts per billion — meaning the water is safe enough to drink — and very little has been found on the ocean bottom. Much of it has been eaten by bacteria native to the Gulf’s oil seeps, and another new study shows that other microscopic creatures including flagellates and ciliates ate the bacteria, and in turn provided food for plankton.

The Dauphin Island Sea Lab, a teaching and research consortium of 22 colleges and universities in Alabama, ran the fish-population study. Asked why the group has been virtually invisible in the national media, Valentine says that, unlike some scientists, they refrained from speculating about the impact of the spill until they had real evidence.

Although the early report has not been peer reviewed, it is credible — this kind of research isn’t anything new for the Sea Lab folks. They’ve been conducting surveys off the coasts of Mississippi and Alabama for years, which gives them a baseline with which to compare the post-spill numbers. Their methodology is powerful because it is simple and straightforward: They drag a net through eleven different survey sites up to 60 miles off the coast, then weigh, classify, and count the critters they snare.

According to Valentine, the last word will come in the spring — before heavy commercial fishing begins again — with a follow-up study. Already, however, anecdotal reports support the finding: Darrell Carpenter, president of the Louisiana Charter Boat Association, was recently quoted as saying, “The fish are off the charts. There are no fewer fish. There are more fish, because they’ve been un-harassed all summer. There are more and bigger fish.” NOAA has said there have been no fish kills tied to oil, has certified seafood in the Gulf as safe, and has reopened most of the water there for fishing.

Fish and shrimp aren’t the only creatures that have survived the spill. Two other recent reports have looked at what happened to deep sea-coral formations, which, unlike fish, can’t get out of the way of toxins or water low in oxygen. Media outlets including the New York Times recently ran stories about a dying patch of coral that was found, coated with an unidentified material, seven miles from the Deepwater site.

Its passing would be tragic; some of these coral colonies may be hundreds of years old, and there’s no telling how long it would take for them to regenerate. What most outlets didn’t report, however, was that 16 other surveyed sites, including one ten miles away from the well head, are doing just fine, along with the fish, crustaceans, and other creatures that live there, according to Charles Fisher, the marine biologist from Penn State who headed the expedition. Researchers from the Center for Marine

Science at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington who hitched a ride with the Greenpeace ship *Arctic Sunrise* in October also failed to find any coral damage.

Interestingly enough, the researchers tracked down coral sites by looking for old hydrocarbon seeps, a common feature of the Gulf that exude millions of gallons of oil and methane annually. Over millennia, Fisher says, “the seep conditions promote rock growth and corals like rock.” That’s yet another indication, like the vast clouds of oil-eating bacteria that live in those seeps and that disposed of the spill, of how deeply hydrocarbons are entwined in the Gulf’s ecosystem.

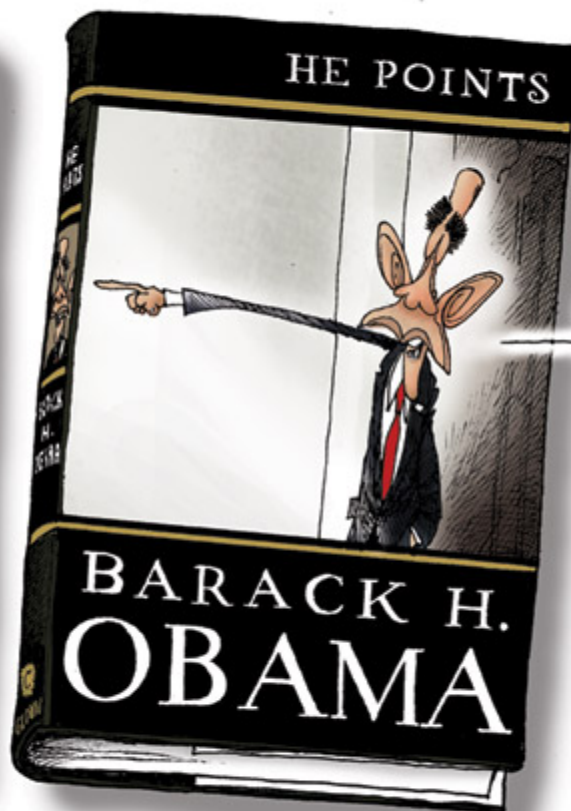
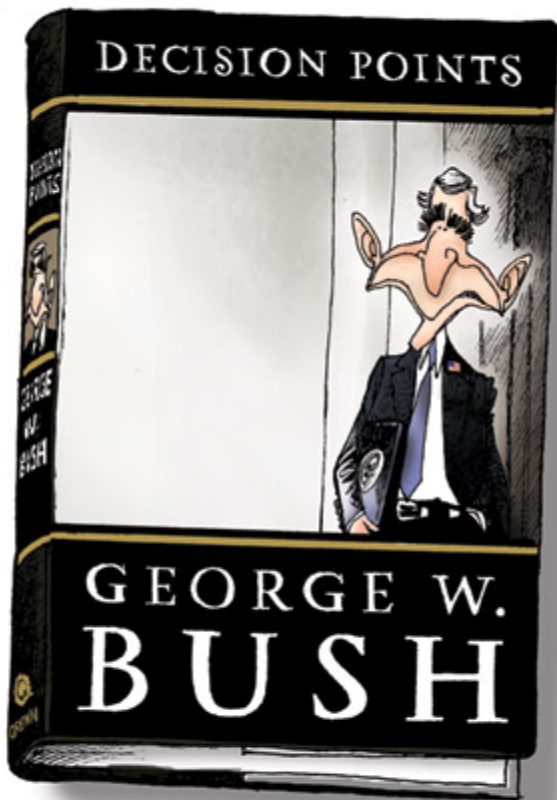
The site of the damage was small compared with some of the areas studied, about 15 by 40 meters with a few outlying colonies, mostly sea fans. “Many colonies are only partially dead at this point. If in fact they stop dying and little bits are left alive, we may see regeneration when we get back,” Dr. Fisher says. He plans another cruise to reexamine the area and look for more coral sites close to the well head. At that point, based on the location of other coral die-offs, we should have a fair idea of the area most impacted by the spill.

These new studies are more bad news for headline-hunting journalists and the establishment environmentalists who have been cheering for the death of the Gulf of Mexico in service of their green agenda. Real science (as opposed to media events that somehow never produce verifiable results) has made it increasingly clear that the doomsday scenarios they promoted will not come to pass. As word spreads that fish populations have increased, the alarmists and conspiracy theorists won’t just be wrong, they will be laughingstocks. The Great Oil Spill Panic of 2010 will go down in history as mass hysteria on par with the Dutch tulip bubble.

Lou Dolinar is a retired columnist and reporter for Newsday. He is currently working on a book about what really happened in the Deepwater Horizon spill.

Dist by Wash Post Writers Group
Lisak 2010 11-10



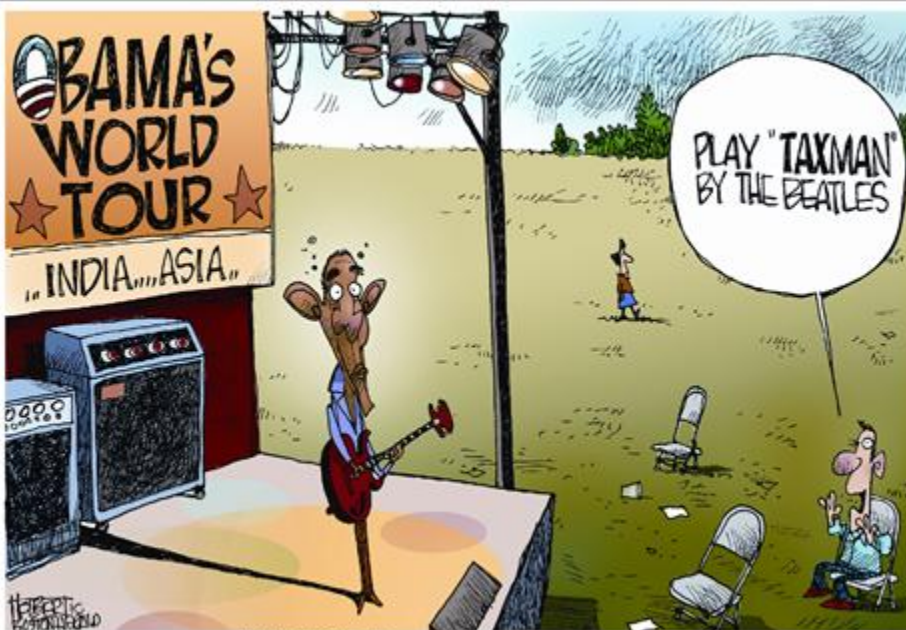


MY
INCOMPETENCE
IS ALL **HIS**
FAULT.

Gary Varvel
THE INDIVIDUAL IS SOLD
©2010 CRUAGES.COM



garyvarvel.com



NOT THE 'ROCK STAR' HE WAS
TWO YEARS AGO...

